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The Role Of Intercultural Mediation In The Integration Of Foreign Students

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Abstract

The school represents an area in which it is clearly evident the level of the deep changes that, especially since the last decade of the twentieth century, have characterized the process of migration in Italy. The growth of foreign students leads inevitably the need to start a school policy aimed at fostering dialogue between different cultures and promoting the inclusion of immigrant pupils. In this sense, in order to create an intercultural dialogue is necessary that the interlocutors learn to use their communication skills to interact with each other and to start a balanced relationship based on respect for differences. In this case, intercultural mediation can play a fundamental role, since it appears as one of the primary functions of the educational relationship. Moreover, it can promote intercultural dialogue in schools and be the basis for a positive relationship with teachers and natives classmates. In this regard, moving from the idea that the lacking knowledge of the language and the implicit culture can make the construction of intercultural dialogue more complex, this article will be focused on the role of intercultural mediation for promoting educational and social integration of immigrants, in the wake of national and international literature on this subject.

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1. Introduction

From an intercultural point of view, mediation can be considered a determining factor in social integration policies and is necessary both to allow foreign citizens to exercise their rights and to be able to avail themselves of the same opportunities of the native citizens, and to foster cultural integration through the reciprocal knowledge and

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the exchange between different cultures. Since intercultural communication is defined as “a social process through which different standards of conduct blend in: the words, the gestures, the looks, the mimicry, the interpersonal space that it determines”, it is easy to understand why, sometimes, it is difficult to give the right interpretation to the messages that we get from the *other* (Kbati, 2004, pp. 79-80). It is therefore a matter of helping the speakers to relate to each other in a balanced way, that is, to alternate themselves “according to an equilibrium grounded on reciprocity” (Fiorucci, 2003, p. 90).

2. The fundamental characteristics of the intercultural mediation

In his definition of mediation, the French scholar J.F. Six describes it with four adjectives underlining four fundamental characteristics: first of all, mediation “*is creative* in the sense that one of its purposes is to create new connections, which did not exist before, between people or groups, from which both parties benefit”; secondly, mediation “*is renewing* to the extent that it allows to improve the existing connections between the mediated parties, connections that had been deteriorated or loosened before the conflict”; moreover, the mediation “*is preventive* in the sense that it foresees and prevents the conflicts that might occur between people or groups”; lastly, mediation “*is therapeutic* every time that a mediator comes into play when the conflict is already existing and has to assist and help the people and the groups to find solutions, and to chose ways out of the conflict” (Six, 1990, p. 44-54). Essentially, according to the scholar, these four forms of mediation tend to create or re-create the *communication* thanks to the intervention of the mediator, whose role is of decisive importance, as he acts as a *bridge* between different cultures. In its broadest meaning, mediation can be described as a practice aimed at solving problems due to communication barriers that can originate from the lack of knowledge of the language and culture of the interlocutor. From the immigrants’ point of view, however, such difficulties are definitely more relevant, as they exacerbate a situation in and of herself problematic. In fact, the migratory experience is in herself a difficult experience, since it entails considerable changes in the lives of the individuals and inevitably arouses a series of contrasting reactions and feelings. In fact, the parting from the land of origin and from the affective relations, as well as the change of lifestyle and the resulting sense of loneliness, of lack of certainties and cultural references (Grinberg, 1990, p. 68-69), can cause strong disorientation and affect negatively on the psychophysical level as well. In this respect, it is easy to understand the importance of promoting a valid intervention of mediation that aims, on the one hand, to foster the dialogue among different cultures and, on the other hand, that considers the intrinsic value of the people and of the fact that each individual –independently from one’s own culture- perceives and experiences such changes in a totally subjective way and, therefore, needs and active and participating listening more than methodological and organizational procedures based on the mere knowledge of the culture of origin (Dusi, 2000, pp. 175-178).

3. The role of mediation in the school

The school represents one of the areas where it is possible to clearly see the extent of the deep changes that, especially from the last ten years of the twentieth-century, have characterized the migratory process in Italy. In particular, the choice of many immigrant families to not consider Italy as a transitional place to reach other destinations, but rather as a landing place where to start over with a new life, is widely visible within our schools, where, in the last years, the percentage of foreign pupils has reached decisively significant levels. A similar increase of the number of foreign students necessarily entails the need to launch an educational policy aimed at fostering the dialogue among different cultures and at promoting the inclusion of immigrant students. In this respect, the educational measures put to use by the Ministry on Education have addressed the issue of mediation not only as a way to foster the reception of foreign pupils and the school-family relationship, but also as a criterion for the promotion and the development of intercultural education, independently from the presence of foreign students in the schools. In the school context, the mediator must support the teachers, foster the relationship between the school and the families of the immigrant pupils, and carry out an orientation activity to give those families the possibility to know and be confident with the educational system. In this regard, the Italian scholar in Science of Education Graziella Favaro asserts that it is necessary to distinguish the mediation interventions according to the identity of the

subjects involved, and suggests four groups of addressees: the immigrant families, the immigrant children, the teachers and other Italian operators and, lastly, the Italian children (Favaro, 2001, p. 25-26.).

Regarding the families, the role of the mediator must be to provide them with the necessary information concerning the services offered by the school, to guide and accompany them inside the various school facilities, to translate into their source language the documents, the notices and the various informative materials written in Italian, as well as to intervene during the meetings with the school staff, in particular with teachers and principals, to foster the interactions and to prevent or mitigate possible conflicts. Towards the immigrant pupils, instead, besides being the “guarantor and defender” of their rights, the mediator must become a reference and an identification model, providing them with moral support to help them reduce their anxieties and the inevitable initial disorientation, and supporting them during the phase of reception and integration. He must also help them to know the rules in force in the new school and to appreciate and accept the Italian culture. Finally, concerning immigrant children, his task is also to trace out their biography and their previous education, as well as to give value to their culture and source language, illustrating them to their classmates. Therefore, for the purposes of a good integration of foreign children and their families in the school, the role played by the mediator with the teachers turns out to be fundamental. In this case, in fact, his task consist in facilitating the communicative exchange with the foreign pupil and his parents, in informing the teacher about the child’s personal history and education and about how the school functions in his country of origin, in assisting the teacher in the teaching of Italian as a second language and in collaborating actively in the processing of intercultural projects. Lastly, in order to foster a positive confrontation between the foreign child and his Italian classmates, the mediator cooperates on the didactic initiatives of intercultural education and, through tales and moments of intercultural entertainment, helps the native children to know and appreciate the culture, the language and the country of origin of the foreign students.

4. Conclusions

In the light of these statements, it is easy to understand the importance of the contribution that the mediator can offer in the school. Nonetheless, it must be considered that the mediator is not a teacher and, therefore, does not have a specific training regarding teaching in school and, in general, does not have any didactic experience either. Therefore, when requesting a mediation intervention, the school must be aware that the mediator is an important resource and can offer a valid contribution to review and expand the educational syllabus and the didactic programmes, but he cannot replace the teachers for their role and expertise. In this regard, finally, the educational system must become aware that the role of the mediator does not have sense if he is not accompanied and supported by all those people that, in various ways, take part to the school life itself: from the teachers to the parents and the native and foreign pupils.

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